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Preschool Teachers' Experiences of Stress

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Abstract

This research study investigated the phenomenon of stress among a group of preschool teachers. Eight teachers were given opportunities to record and describe current sources of stress. These teachers kept a reflective journal over a two week period and summarised their reflections diagrammatically. The daily journal entries and the diagrammatic representations were analysed for common themes on the sources of stress in the teachers' work. The researcher sought written feedback and confirmation from the teachers that the themes identified by the researcher during analysis were the major sources of stress for them. Confirmation was given that time pressures, meeting children's needs, dealing with non-teaching tasks, maintaining early childhood philosophy and practice, meeting personal needs, issues with parents of the children, interpersonal relationships, and attitudes and perceptions about early childhood programs were the major sources of stress for this particular group of teachers. Consideration of the themes support the view that there is a need for research to explore teachers' experiences of stress within their specific teaching context such as preschool or childcare, as well as within the wider contexts of the school campus and the educational, organisational and social system. Differentiation between the internal demands which teachers place upon themselves in their daily work and the external demands from organisational and social pressures must be understood in order to provide support for teachers to cope with and adapt to change.

Preschool Teachers' Experience of Stress.

Occupational stress has significant effects on psychological well-being and serious account is being taken of the health consequences of this stress (Fletcher, 1991). Stress needs to be understood within the particular occupational context in which it occurs. Social change and economic imperatives have challenged the teaching profession over the last decade, making it important to document the effects of these changes on teachers. Research has supported the view that teaching is a stressful occupation (Dworkin, Haney, Dworkin & Telschow, 1990; Kyriacou, 1987; Schwab, Jackson, & Schuler, 1986; Pines & Maslach, 1980) and this stress has increased as the relationship between society and education has become more complex (Esteve & Fracchia, 1986). As a result of social change, teachers face increased parental and community expectations for the outcomes and standards of education and the relevance of the curriculum. This has resulted in pressure to implement change in curricula and teaching practices. Many teachers assert that they are inadequately prepared to implement new curriculum (Bailey, Berrell & Gibson, 1991). Also, impacting on teachers' work and its current organisation are economic imperatives stemming from governments and employing authorities demanding more accountability in the work of teachers. In a period of economic recession there are fewer resources available for education, as well as high levels of unemployment of teachers, resulting in a climate in which employment security is felt to be under threat. Such pressures from the social and educational system are externally driving much of the day-to-day demands in teachers' work, increasing considerably the psychological and workload effects. These demands affect teaching roles without teachers always knowing how to adapt and cope with them. Because sources of stress are many and varied, a considerable level of alertness and caution is required by teachers to meet the changing demands.

The prevalence and sources of occupational stress among teachers have been important topics for research (Borg, 1990; Coles & Walker, 1989; Dworkin et al., 1990; Fimian, 1987; Kaiser & Polczynski, 1982). Previous research has identified stressors for groups of teachers in specific teaching contexts but there is a notable absence of research about the teacher in the kindergarten or preschool setting. Although some studies have examined the impact of stress on teachers of young children in the context of the child care setting (Duncan, 1980; Pines & Maslach, 1980), most studies have focussed on primary school teachers, high school teachers or tertiary education teachers (Byrne, 1991; Capel, 1991; Dworkin et al., 1990; Schwab & Iwanicki, 1982; Sarros & Sarros, 1990; Tokar & Feitler, 1986).

Teacher stress has been defined in a number of different ways. The most frequently quoted definition of teacher stress belongs to Kyriacou (1987) who defined teacher stress as the experience by teachers of negative or unpleasant emotions resulting from aspects of their work. These emotional

responses are mediated by the perception that the demands made upon the teacher constitute a threat to personal self-esteem or well-being and by personal coping mechanisms which are activated to reduce the perceived threat. Trendall (1989) proposed that stress is a multi-factorial concept composed of factors within the individual, the organisation and nature of the work place, and the nature of the wider society. This leads to the lowering of feelings of personal self-worth, achievement, effectiveness and of coping within one's professional role. Otto (1986) provided a model which described stress as a lack of fit between the external demands of the situation, the external resources and constraints, the internal demands of the individual and the internal resources and constraints perceived by the individual. These conceptions emphasise that stress involves the contribution of personal and external factors, the individual's perception of these and the individual's resulting negative response or reaction.

In order to understand teacher stress, researchers have sought to identify the major sources. Common stressors of work overload, time restraints, problems with child behaviour, working conditions, relationships with colleagues, lack of resources and the physical demands of teaching have been identified repeatedly by researchers (Albertson & Kagan, 1987; Coles & Walker, 1989; Dewe, 1986; Finlay-Jones, 1986; Fletcher & Payne, 1982; Hargreaves, 1990; Kyriacou & Suttcliffe, 1979; O'Connor & Clarke, 1990; Otto, 1986; Trendall, 1989). Borg, Riding and Falzon (1991) and Brissie, Hoover-Dempsey and Bassler (1988) have also identified that poor working conditions, perceptions of low status and poor school ethos influence teacher stress. In the course of identifying sources of stress, many studies have investigated the impact of particular demographic variables (gender, age, marital/family status, teaching experience and age level taught) on perceived stress (Byrne, 1991; Malik, Mueller, & Meinke, 1991; Schonfeld, 1992; Schwab & Iwanicki, 1982; Schwab, Jackson, & Schuler, 1986; Tokar & Feitler, 1986). Consideration of such characteristics is useful when examining and associating the sources of stress reported, however findings from the above studies indicate that such demographic variables do not predict stress.

Although common areas emerge in quantitative research as sources of stress for teachers in general, consideration has yet to be given to the individual teacher within the context of particular educational systems and also to the societal influences which impact on these systems. Also, relatively common sources of stress reported should not override the importance of the individual teacher's concerns and the importance of the specific context in which teaching takes place. Findings by Smith and Bourke (1992) and Capel (1991) confirm that examination of the individual nature of stress and the context in which teaching takes place is crucial to the understanding of a teacher's experience of stress. Blase (1986) recognised the limited amount of qualitative research into stress and noted that open-ended methods which give research participants opportunities to describe in detail the meaning of work stress from their own perspective have rarely been used. Burns (1990)

noted that qualitative forms of investigation embrace the host of personal meanings that are derived from the context of direct experiencing and that perceptions and interpretations of reality are linked with these meaning structures. Most of the instruments used to measure teacher stress are highly structured survey measures which control responses and which may not be sensitive to individual's perceptions of stress. Furthermore, many of the instruments are based on theoretical ideas and assumptions developed from studies of stress outside of education (e.g. Kyriacou, 1987; Schwab & Iwanicki, 1982). Qualitative methodologies provide avenues that can lead to the discovery of deeper levels of meaning (Burns, 1990). In addition, Burns (1990) noted that qualitative research has made educators realise that reality should never be taken for granted given that attention must be paid to the multiple realities and socially constructed meanings that exist within every social context. The societal and educational context may be the source of some unique features of stress which warrant qualitative analysis.

The Social, Political, Economic and Educational Context of the Research

Social changes and economic imperatives have severely challenged the teaching profession over the last decade within Australia. Proposals for educational reform have been linked to broader social, economic and political agendas and these have resulted in major organisational changes. In the report *Focus on Schools* (1990), the Queensland Department of Education had been influenced by knowledge about how modern organisations operated efficiently and effectively, and regarded successful organisations as those which responded to change and which incorporated the capacity to manage ongoing change into their operations.

Efficiency and effectiveness in its structures and management practices are the ultimate goals within the Queensland Department of Education. For instance, the process of devolution in decision-making to schools has been an attempt to move from centralist structures to give local schools and their teachers greater power to manage their own affairs and so increase the efficiency and effectiveness of schools.

Until the early 1970's, a highly centralised pattern of administration existed. The publication of *Schools in Australia* (1973), by the Australian Schools Commission, accelerated the reshaping of education policy. In this report, the Karmel Committee argued for equality, diversity and devolution of power whereby responsibility should be devolved as far as possible to the people involved in the actual task of schooling. In practice, however, the achievement of these aims to broaden participation in educational reform and practice has been hindered by a lack of adequate financial resources. Restricted financial allocations in education have meant that schools are required to do more with less, and the demand by legislation for accountability leaves less room for autonomy and real

devolution in decision-making to schools. This has forced schools to concentrate less on the local educational needs and more on the implementation of policies which stem from the centralist bureaucracy. McMurdo (1993) when discussing possible negative consequences of devolution described that effort may be diverted from the essential educative functions that a school must perform. Image-making may become a preoccupation as schools seek to attract the right students to enhance their reputation. Principals may be seen as Chief Executive Officers and entrepreneurs rather than educators. Financial considerations also dominate school management decisions. McMurdo (1993) has argued that the rhetoric of democracy is never fulfilled because the emphasis is on tightening central control through national curricula, testing and standards, and through the mechanisms of managerialism, competitiveness, hierarchy, and task orientation. Teachers seem to have too little authority to carry out the responsibilities assigned to them.

Schools are being asked to address a multitude of social issues in their curricula and this leads to pressures that crowd the teacher's day. Key functions of the Queensland Department of Education's Social Justice Policy detailed in *Focus on Schools* (1990), included developing policy for students with special needs, aboriginal and islander education, gender equity, multicultural students, students with disabilities, and socio-economically disadvantaged students. Policy initiatives to recognise the multiculturalism of Australian society, the integration of special needs children and greater gender equity are valued by teachers, but schools have been expected to implement new policies for the large part by using existing financial resources which have been inadequate (Westwood, 1991). These changes have meant that increased knowledge and skills have been continually required by teachers across the whole educational system to understand and adapt their practices in the face of change. It has also resulted in greater workloads because of the increase in responsibilities at the school level.

In Queensland during the 1970's, steps were taken by way of election promises to create a preschool directorate within the Department of Education. A system of voluntary free preschool education for all four year-old children was introduced. The government established that preschools would be located on the grounds of existing primary schools but would operate as part of the preschool directorate (Ashby, 1980).

Teaching staff were specifically trained in early childhood education, which encompasses the period from birth to eight years of age (Donaldson, Grieve & Pratt, 1983). Donaldson et al., (1983) have described early childhood as a period of momentous significance for all people growing up in our culture. It is during this time that children enter the social world beyond the family and establish themselves as members of a community of their peers, and encounter and deal with the challenges set to them by the system of education within their culture. This places a very special responsibility

on those involved in the teaching of young children during this period (Donaldson et al., 1983). It was accepted in the proposal for preschool programs that the curriculum would have an early childhood character and would not be a downward extension of the primary school curriculum. The preschool teacher would be given autonomy to create preschool programs that would promote child-centred education, and give attention to practices associated with developmental-interactionist approaches to curriculum, teaching and learning (Biber, Shapiro and Wickens, 1971; Kohlberg and Mayer, 1972; Ashby, 1972; Halliwell, 1977; Hohmann, Banet and Weikart, 1979). These aspects represented a major innovation in the field of preschool education in Australia (Ashby, 1980).

Issues and limitations detected in reported research have shaped the focus of this research study, as well as consideration being given to examining the societal and organisational factors currently impinging on education in Queensland. The aim of this study has been to describe the nature of stress currently being experienced by a group of preschool teachers in their daily work, using a qualitative approach to data collection.

Research Methodology

The approach employed in this research aimed to produce a description of the meanings of stress to preschool teachers and an analysis, interpretation, and categorisation of these meanings. A reflective journal kept by participants, a diagrammatic representation summarising sources of stress, and written feedback on the themes by the participants enabled this description to be made.

Bogdan and Biklen (1982) proposed that the worth of a study is the degree to which it generates description and understanding. Keeping a personal document such as a reflective journal is an effective method of acquiring such description and understanding. A personal document is any self-revealing record that intentionally or unintentionally yields information regarding the structure, dynamics and functioning of the author's life (Woods, 1986). Woods also noted that documents which have a strong personal investment provide indicators of the participants' views and attitudes and may contain much more information than can be acquired by other means.

The purpose of the analysis was not to generalise about teacher stress and all teachers, but to understand stress in the preschool setting from the perspective of the group of teachers within this study. During analysis, the data was segmented and organised so that themes could be identified. The themes were used to explore the commonalities across the preschool teachers' perspectives on stress, and to examine teachers' identification of, and reactions to, the societal and organisational factors currently impinging on these preschool teachers.

Participants

Eight preschool teachers employed within the public education system in a metropolitan area were invited to participate in the study. All teachers approached agreed to participate. Preschool in this study is defined as the non-compulsory year of education for four and five year olds preceding the first year of formal schooling. All of these teachers were women and they ranged in age from 28 to 46 years, with teaching experience ranging from 4 to 15 years. The sample size was considered appropriate in the light of the data collection methods. In the analysis, pseudonyms have been used for the participants.

Research Procedure

At an introductory visit, the purpose and the nature of the research was explained. After accepting the invitation to be involved in the study, each teacher was asked to keep a journal for an agreed two week period which was towards the end of a school term. This period was considered appropriate because teachers have been found to have higher stress levels towards the end of a term (Capel, 1991; Esteve, 1989; Kinnunen, 1989). As journal entries take time to complete, two weeks was considered to be a practical and accommodating time period for the participants. The participants were asked to record observations of stressful events and their feelings, reactions, interpretations and reflections on these events. The journals were useful sources of meaning as the teachers did not simply describe everything that happened but instead from their personal perspective emphasised certain aspects of any stressful experiences. The participants were also asked to produce a diagrammatic representation of their overall experience of stress during the two week period. The diagram provided an immediate summary of the individual teacher's perceptions of stress, and emphasised the sources of stress they believed were impacting on their teaching role. During analysis common themes were identified from the journal entries and diagrams of the group. The participants were shown the themes evolving from the data and were asked to provide the researcher with feedback. The participants made a written response about the relevance of the themes and provided a ranking for each theme in terms of how important it was in their experience of stress.

Procedure for Analysis

Elbow (1986) emphasised that the researcher has to be involved in a process of self-insertion in the participant's story as a way of coming to know the participant's experience and in order to give the participant voice. The journals were read many times as a way of coming to know the teachers'

experiences of stress and as a way of entering into the teachers' thinking or perceiving. This earnest study of the journal entries resulted in the development of a sense of themes across the teachers' experiences of stress and an awareness of recurring terms or descriptions within the journals. The researcher reconstructed teachers' written comments by sorting the information and descriptions from each journal into components of perceived stress. These components were reviewed, combined and checked against the journal entries and diagrams to generate sets of components or themes. Burns (1990) described the theme as the most useful unit of analysis. It is important to note that the themes emerged from the data and that the categories for sorting data were not established prior to the analysis. The themes incorporated commonalities across the preschool teachers' perspectives of their sources of stress. Many of these descriptions and themes overlap and are interrelated, illustrating the complex nature of what constitutes stress at any one time. Diagrammatic representations of personal sources of stress were created by six of the participating teachers. The themes evolving from the journal entries were also revealed in these diagrams.

The teachers were shown the collective themes evolving from the data sources and asked to confirm whether these illustrated the major sources of stress for them. This process of collaboration gave the teachers an opportunity to respond to the researcher's interpretation of their experiences. The teachers' written feedback confirmed that the themes were meaningful and did characterise the major sources of stress facing them. Reflecting on their own experiences of stress the teachers then ranked the thematic categories from 'most' to 'least' stressful.

Findings

The convergence of the information from the three data sources (journals, diagrams, and written feedback) provided a strong basis for the conceptualisation of the nature and relative importance of stressors for teachers in the preschool environment. These themes were time pressures, children's needs, non-teaching tasks, maintaining early childhood philosophy and practice, personal needs, issues with parents of the children, interpersonal relationships, attitudes and perceptions about early childhood programs. The thematic extracts from the journal entries are presented in the order of importance assigned to them by the teachers' combined rankings, from most to least stressful.

The descriptions make it clear that the preschool teacher's job is complex and demanding. The descriptions highlight that understanding what constitutes stress is by no means a simple task. The diagrammatic representations of stress also illustrate the complexity. Two such representations are presented in Figure 1 and Figure 2. The contributions of internal factors in the way stress is

perceived and external factors stemming from organisational demands are evident throughout. The contributions that internal factors make to perceived stress is especially strong for these preschool teachers. Such factors include teachers' expectations, desires or wishes about aspects of their job and their perceptions about whether these were being or could be fulfilled (e.g. "There are so many things only the teacher can do...."; "How helpless I feel...."; "I wish there was something more we could do....", "Being able to give the children with special needs more one-to-one interaction would be wonderful..."). These teachers are experiencing dilemmas as a result of trying to maintain practices based on their ideals.

Insert Figures 1 and 2 about here

Numerous organisational demands are described and these are communicated across the themes. For example, all teachers identified difficulties associated with integrating special needs children and the complexity of the teacher's role to plan and liaise with others to meet these children's needs. All identified changes as a result of the devolution in decision-making processes, such as frequent meetings out of school hours and extensive reporting demands.

The Themes:

Time Pressures

Teachers were most stressed by the numerous demands on their time and the interruptions to their planned time. The teachers' sense of control was closely related to time demands. Clearly, time pressures interfere with all facets of teaching and this is a pressure that overlaps into all the identified themes. It was described repeatedly in the journal entries and featured in every diagram and therefore was given a separate category in order to acknowledge the experience of this group of teachers.

"Between completing forms, writing up observations and planning there is little time left in a day. I seem to be going non-stop. Where's that non-contact time?" (Erin); "...Parents, children, specialists etc, it seems there are all sorts of people making demands on my time" (Kim); "The phone rang hot today, it is just so difficult having to do these extra things during session time. I know we have teacher aides but there are so many things only the teacher can do" (Laura); "Today was stressed by the fact that I had to find time to conduct a parent-interview during the program. I had a request from regional guidance clinic for a report on a child - more time. There are never enough

hours in the day" (Nerida); "Always rushing but getting nowhere! There never seems to be enough time for the children to develop their play, the time limitations mean that we are always hurrying the children along. They don't have enough time to develop their ideas to a satisfactory level" (Diane).

Children's Needs

The difficulties of trying to maintain a child-responsive curriculum and dealing with other competing demands on the teachers' time was very evident. The role of teacher to meet the needs of children includes responding to children with language problems and other special needs, being there to talk to individual children, taking care of sick children, managing behaviour, supporting development. Changes in family life are impacting upon the preschool setting as teachers believe that they need to meet more of the emotional needs of children. Preschool teachers have high expectations about meeting the needs of the whole child and believe that it is their responsibility to assist each individual child's emotional, social, physical, and cognitive development.

"A child who has many special needs has started on a new program. More things to plan for" (Fiona); "Being able to give the children with special needs more one-to-one interaction would be wonderful. My nine language problem children will all be able to receive some intervention next term - Thank Goodness!!" (Erin); "Hectic start to the day. I had two parents who wanted to discuss their child's progress with me. This left no time to greet the children before starting time. Also today one set of wet pants and another child with diarrhoea" (Kim); "N came back today - I am still worried about her but mum says she is fine so what can I do. Still I had to keep an eye on her all afternoon to make sure she was OK" (Laura); "The twins were a bit better today but M. was a wretch! He's been just over the top lately. This disruptive and smart behaviour is a real trial at times" (Sandra); "...Planning for time-out for behaviour modification of a special needs child and a 'normal' child who have been having the occasional conflict is difficult. There are children who while making some progress in the area of fine motor development are still not performing to the normal level of expectations" (Nerida).

Non-Teaching Tasks

The nature of the preschool environment is rather informal when compared to a larger school system and there are fewer gatekeepers to protect the teacher from unnecessary interruptions. There are no administrators or secretaries to answer phones or sort out paper work. The preschool teachers' role is extended to equipment and material purchaser, secretary, cleaner, liaison officer with students and sales representatives, profile and report writer. There is no allocated non-contact time in which to do such tasks so the teacher has to make decisions about what part of her program or role

she will sacrifice to meet the demands. Teachers often feel a loss of control with these additional tasks because they have not had training with things such as speech screening, and it is not their area of expertise. To resolve this dilemma teachers are required to attend inservice courses and meetings out of school hours.

"8.10 before school meeting. Lunchtime was spent buying resources. After school, I went to an inservice afternoon till 5.30" (Fiona); "The only day that we are able to have any time as a 'lunch break' and I've got a meeting. Considering our Father's Night is 5-7 p.m. tonight I'm going to be very glad when the day is over" (Erin); "Another student walks in off the street wanting to observe a child for an assignment. More time away from the children while getting her organised. Two reps. turned up this afternoon unannounced, during session time and expected me to be able to stop and look at their products. Workshop straight after school at primary school. Another rushed afternoon" (Kim); "Now have to rush over to the school for a staff meeting. One of the toilets broke during the morning session and flooded the children's bathroom - so not only did we have to clean up the mess, we then had to keep the children out. Unfortunately, I missed one child going in and the bathroom was again flooded, rang the school to arrange for a plumber and was put on hold. Difficult to supervise group when on the phone" (Laura); "Stressful day. Did a lot of putting away in readiness for holidays and for voting here on Saturday, pressured by furniture shifting and hire people with deadlines. Tried to do one of the speech screening tests on M - that was stressful and a trial! I really felt quite incompetent, after all it's not my area of expertise. I need a Speech Therapist - or at least a teacher to supervise my group while I concentrate on the speech screening. I can't do both successfully" (Sandra); "Sales people come to the door, I'm trying to get special event things done, phone keeps ringing with people wanting information. Interruptions again and again" (Lorraine); "Writing an up to date personal profile for my special needs child and then consulting with speech therapists and physiotherapists made me aware that as classroom teachers more responsibility is being placed on us to accommodate special needs without the training or time, and these specialists are spending time in special needs units where they're unaware of the needs of the special child in the regular classroom" (Nerida).

Maintaining Early Childhood Philosophy and Practice

A conflict between expectations about quality in an early childhood program and maintaining that quality in practice exists for these teachers. The ideology behind the program is that teachers are to provide a stimulating learning environment, and be able to capitalise on children's spontaneously expressed interests and on emerging events in the room. First hand, interactive experiences are developed while sensitively monitoring individual children's responses and supporting their unique

ways of learning. Stress occurs when these expectations are not achieved due to interruptions or the like and when teachers push themselves to achieve these extremely difficult goals.

"Had to change the routine to accommodate other things going on in the centre" (Fiona); "Another day when we can't go outside because of the weather. Six of the afternoon children also had dental appointments at the school today so all were collected at various stages of the afternoon causing disruptions. Bad planning for today - I forgot about the P and C Meeting at 11.30 and have planned to cook Gingerbread men with the afternoon children. Can I change it now they already know?" (Laura); "Instead of getting started on Fathers' Day I am totally involved in developing a new 'track' in the children's play. Must drop other things and focus on this interest and need. Children need me to be actively involved planning, guiding and helping - no time for other things. Speech therapist is coming and it's raining. Where will the group go? - rearrange office to accommodate group" (Lorraine).

Personal Needs

In order to accomplish all the tasks associated with the role of teacher, many of these teachers sacrifice personal needs. The demands are so many, and the time is so limited that finding a balance is a difficult and perhaps impossible exercise. The interpersonal demands of teaching are high and often carry expectations of 'being all things to all people'.

"Hectic morning at home so rushed to work feeling flustered" (Fiona); "After being up half the night with my own daughter I was probably less understanding than my normal self. Today is unbearable even before the children arrive, I've thrown up and my migraine has continued.." (Erin); "Feeling lousy today. Been up half the night sick. Still have to go to work because of the student. It's easier to go to work than make alternative arrangements" (Kim); "Woke up feeling just dreadful this morning but have to come in, not only is it the father's day stall but also the student is coming for her observational visit. I have had one virus after the other, lately. Today no lunch and no break in between the session - it's hard to keep going without any break" (Laura); "What a hectic afternoon. Our principal came down to have a meeting with us. He didn't leave until 28 past 12 and my session starts at 12.30! So it didn't leave much time for me to prepare my room. We had a father's night tonight at preschool from 5 - 7.00 p.m. So it was a long day. Now I'm at home and I have to type up a report for one of my 'specials' for a school placement next year and I have to try to study up on 'electricity' which I'm hoping to present tomorrow AND plan my program as well, and then I'm supposed to speech screen at least one child before the speech therapy meeting next week!! Maybe tomorrow will be my lucky day. Didn't get home from preschool tonight until about 7.40 p.m. and I'm too tired now to do anymore!!!" (Sandra); "The time taken to discuss administrative situations and

then trying to meet day care time for my child is stressful. Shuffling my family routines and needing to accommodate an additional Fathers' Day night causes family tension. Often it is my family that loses not only time, but also quality of time. Speech workshop after school for two hours added to the preparation time workload - caused stress when dealing with family commitments" (Nerida).

Issues with Parents of the Children

Family structures and employment patterns of parents are changing. Single parent families, stepfamilies, and more working parents are evidence of social change. Often such changes make it difficult for parents to participate in their children's schooling, as they also are trying to meet a variety of demands. Some teachers believe that parents use the preschool centre as a child care facility because they have no network for minding sick children or childcare fees are not affordable. Other parents have no time to discover the value of the preschool day and the educational philosophy behind the program. Communication with parents is highly valued in preschool education and finding ways to maintain it amongst daily pressures is no easy task. The role of the teacher extends itself to caring, monitoring nutrition, nursing, and providing attention, love, and understanding.

"This morning I could have screamed at a parent that we are not a child-minding service. This same child also had no face washer and had been ill last night" (Erin); "I discouraged a difficult parent from staying for the session. No lunch break today because I had to supervise children who were not been collected. Two children are collected 20 minutes late with no explanation or apology. A third child is collected 45 minutes late, and I have another parent wanting an extra day at preschool for one of the 'specials'. Somehow I get the feeling we are a babysitting service. Parent ignorance - why do parents insist on sending children when they are obviously unwell - one child has been dropped off with such a bad asthmatic cough that he can hardly catch his breath. After trying to contact mum at home, I find out she is out for the day - playing bowls - of course she sent him to pre-school" (Kim); "What can we do about home environments? Nothing. Give children love and support when we can. One mother has never stayed at preschool. She always keeps her child at home when she has any time off work. It appears preschool is just a part of her child care services. All last week her child was at home with mum on holidays. I wish there was something more we could do to impress on her the educational benefits to her child of the preschool. How can we effectively communicate with parents we never see? Newsletters and notices home just aren't enough and home visits are not possible" (Diane).

Interpersonal Relationships

The nature of preschool is interactive, informal and people-oriented. It is important for these teachers to create and maintain a positive interpersonal environment. These preschool teachers have a multitude of people with whom they encounter in a working day, such as teacher aides, children, parents, principals, administrators, registrars, school staff, cleaners, student teachers, therapists and members of other special agencies.

"The teacher aides seem to be reacting negatively to our increased workload" (Fiona); "I have a teaching practice student at the moment who is struggling with control of the group. I spend a lot of time encouraging her and talking to her. Just had an argument with my principal over release time to consult for one hour with all the specialist staff involved with one of my 'specials', the principal's response - why do you need to go?" (Kim); "Had a mum on roster this afternoon, she was a big help but her toddler caused a few problems. Its hard to have toddlers on roster but its the only way to get the parents. We were cutting out and dressing gingerbread men and the aide is sitting at the puzzle table with one child while I am trying to help four or five at the same time. To top it off one of the children is sick and crying and of course mum isn't home" (Laura); "Student to organise, and a work experience girl, need to find jobs for everyone, keep aide happy if I can. I'm having staff problems - I find these issues very difficult to deal with" (Lorraine).

Attitudes and Perceptions about Early Childhood Programs

Inherent in the problem of community attitudes about preschool education is the dilemma of status; the status assigned to non-compulsory schooling and early childhood programs, to women, to young children, and to teachers associated with young children (Gifford, 1992). The one campus policy for primary and preschools in a local school community has not accounted for the specialised nature of preschool education and instead it is assumed that preschool programs will fit satisfactorily into models developed for primary schools generally. On one hand the primary school is saying that the preschool is part of the campus and involvement is sought. However, often the involvement requested of the preschool is prescriptive and causes the preschool teacher to feel constrained in her efforts to maintain the practices of early childhood education. On the other hand, primary schools are continuing to function as they did before a one campus policy was implemented and are neglecting to inform or include the preschool in school activities and programs.

"Spoke to the organiser of a P-3 activity day only to find that it had been finalised without consulting us and we didn't rate a mention in the newsletter" (Fiona); "The relief aide the registrar sends has no experience working in preschools so I spend half my day telling her what needs to be done" (Kim); "No lunch again today - up at school talking to administration trying to get the preschool included in more things. Got more jobs to do: School Development Plan and Human Relationship

Education Program - preschool is not in on these things. We actually need more contact on a more practical everyday level, not needing more paperwork to fit in around everything else. Such differing philosophies between preschool and school - causes a lot of tension at meeting and discussion times" (Lorraine); "Really rushed to clean up to attend staff meeting. Just as we reached staffroom door we were told the meeting wasn't on - as per usual the preschool wasn't told what was happening. Even though we are the closest building to Administration we are mostly invisible! We really need more/better communication with the rest of the staff. Preschool staff really complaining about ground and cleaning staff priority of 1-7 school and neglect of the preschool as a worthwhile part of the campus" (Diane).

Sources of stress not directly identified as themes but recognised as particular concerns within and across the major identified themes already discussed, were firstly, the concern for increasing responsibility for children with special needs in the regular preschool program (e.g. "I am concerned about special needs children and the amount of time needed to be spent with them" ; "...catering for special needs children affects your own evaluation of yourself as a teacher. Without the definite curriculum guidelines of Primary School, curriculum content is your own responsibility. Have I done enough to help these children?"). Secondly, the concern for the role of the preschool in an educational system faced by major philosophical and organisational changes (e.g. "Uncertainty of direction in which the education system is going with early childhood area - in particular 'preschools'). This is likely to become an increasing stressor as many preschool teachers believe they face devaluations of their specialisation or loss of their educational philosophy in their practices. A related issue highlighted in the diagrams was the lack of availability of support personnel to assist teachers during this change process.

Discussion

The research methods employed in this study allowed the teachers substantial freedom to explain the meanings of stress from their perspectives. Keeping a journal encouraged teachers to be aware of the sources of stress which they were experiencing. The diagrammatic representations conveyed strong and immediate messages about the pressures teachers are feeling as a result of the many demands impacting on their teaching role.

Having identified threatening features of their job, teachers can then try to deal with those issues which they have some control over. The descriptions and diagrams attest to the great degree of organisational and societal change influencing teaching roles, the multidimensional nature of stress in teaching, and to the complexity of the phenomenon of stress wherein a wide range of factors are at

work. Many of these factors are external and beyond the control of the teacher. The loss of representation and practical support means that preschool teachers feel powerless to contest organisational demands and constraints.

It is interesting to note that as well as confirming that common sources of stress can exist for teachers who teach in a similar context, the identified themes seem to have a level of commonality for teachers across contexts. Findings from other studies (Albertson & Kagan, 1987; Coles & Walker, 1989; Dewe, 1986; Finlay-Jones, 1986; Fletcher & Payne, 1982; Hargreaves, 1990; Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1979; O'Connor & Clarke, 1990; Otto, 1986; Trendall, 1989) identified sources of stress such as child behaviour problems, workload and time pressures, working conditions, relationships with colleagues and these were identified again by the teachers in this study. It is important to note the commonalities in the major types of stress in the experiences of preschool teachers and teachers from primary, secondary and tertiary settings. However there are differences within these preschool teachers' descriptions which imply that an extensive range of unique demands exist for preschool teachers. This study has not sought to generalise beyond the experiences of these preschool teachers and further studies could investigate whether the themes isolated here could apply to preschool teachers in general. The outcomes of such research could be the development of policies and practices to reduce work stress.

When examining the time factor, these preschool teachers have absolutely no time when they are away from the children during the program. There are no specialist lessons or non-contact time periods. Organisational changes in education have left this group of preschool teachers with a reduced sense of control over their work practices, in spite of espoused policies in the devolution of decision-making. There is more external control over teachers' work and teachers' time. Extensive demands in the form of meetings, inservice and professional development, report writing and administration tasks are presently performed out of school hours when planning and preparation might have been usually been done. The teaching role has been extended leaving teachers with more to fit into their already hectic working day.

The preschool philosophy values a close relationship with the home environment and with parents. Maintaining this relationship requires much commitment from the teachers as they support parents in their parenting role and keep them informed.

Implementing and maintaining the preschool programs and philosophy requires constant planning and evaluation so that individual needs and development can be catered for. Presentation of the physical environment is extremely important to these preschool teachers. Outdoor areas and indoor areas require preparation of many activities and resources.

The journals of these teachers affirm that dilemmas in current educational directions exist. These dilemmas have implications for practice. The preschool teachers' descriptions echo concern about how the process of integration of 'special needs children' is occurring and about the limited resources available. The concern which these teachers have for meeting these children's developmental needs is very strong. This group of teachers feel that they do not possess adequate knowledge about how to cater for and meet the needs of the special needs child.

A further struggle for these preschool teachers is the lack of understanding of the value and practices of early childhood education. The social and family issues apparent in the journal entries emphasise the interrelationships between care and education for the preschool teacher. Pressures to implement a one campus policy between the local primary school and the preschool have uncovered practical difficulties, such as the physical distances between schools and preschools and the different schedules of each. These factors influence the consultation and communication processes and when they can occur and more attention needs to be given to how the interface between preschools and primary schools can be strengthened.

There is a need to reconsider how the day to day functioning of school programs occurs as there is increasing complexity in the demands on teachers. Focus on the managerial and organisational practices that school systems use is needed in order to develop practices that are more supportive of the teaching responsibilities and this may help to alleviate the stress which teachers are experiencing. Such analysis needs to be based on up to date information (Kyriacou, 1987).

Further qualitative research efforts which investigate the teacher's perspective on work in a variety of educational settings (e.g., child care, preschool, infant grades.) is necessary, particularly during times of social and educational change. Research of this nature with comparative groups of teachers should provide excellent opportunities to understand how support can be provided. Research could focus on how individual teachers attempt to manage and reduce stress and adapt to change, and on the influences of organisational and societal factors on teaching. Issues such as education and care and the changing nature of families could be addressed. Such studies could make a useful contribution to the development of pre-service courses for preschool teachers, providing an understanding of teacher stress and to the consideration of how best to reduce the levels of teacher stress in educational settings.

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